

COWBOY IN COMBAT

Jimmy D. Black Remembers World War II



By R. Lambert

In January 30, 1943 in the Coral Sea where the average depth is over 29,000 feet, orange flames consuming the USS Chicago illuminated menacing dorsal fins of sharks stalking Jimmy D. Black and his fellow crew members in the water. As Japanese planes strafed the struggling men, blood drew more and more sharks. Planes buzzing overhead, detonations from the burning ship's arsenal, and the terrified, anguished screams of men hit by gunfire and shrapnel created a nightmarish cacophony.

It was the fourth time during World War II that Black had found himself in the water as his ship sank, and though he didn't know it then, it wouldn't be the last. By war's end, Black had defied all odds, surviving the sinking of five ships and the perils of seven landings at Guadalcanal, New Hebrides, New Britain, Saipan, Tinian, Tarawa, and Okinawa.

At 0700 on December 7, 1941, Black had just gotten off deck to stand by the USS Oklahoma when the flag, her colors. The Oklahoma and the order came to battle stations.

95 feet up to the gun mount battle station - without a weapon. In preparation for battle, all ammunition including firing pins was locked in a supply locker. Although one officer with a key was always assigned to be on board, Black says that both officers had returned safely ashore the night before, and neither had returned.

"We were on the opposite side and took the first hits," Black remembers. When the order came to abandon ship, Black stared down at the water over 100 feet below as the Oklahoma shuddered from three torpedo hits on the port side. Foul geysers of oil and water spewed over the deck as the ship listed. After the third hit, Oklahoma heeled to a 45-degree angle.

"We're gonna have to jump," Black told Corporal Elmer Drefahl beside him in the crew's nest. "But we should wait until we're over water so we don't risk landing on deck."

Strafing intensified, and when Oklahoma listed far enough to port to allow a clear jump, Black grabbed Drefahl's arm and prepared to dive. But Drefahl refused violently. Explosions forced Black to jump. Holding his arms as close to his sides as possible so

the impact didn't tear them off, he assumed a position that would create the least resistance.

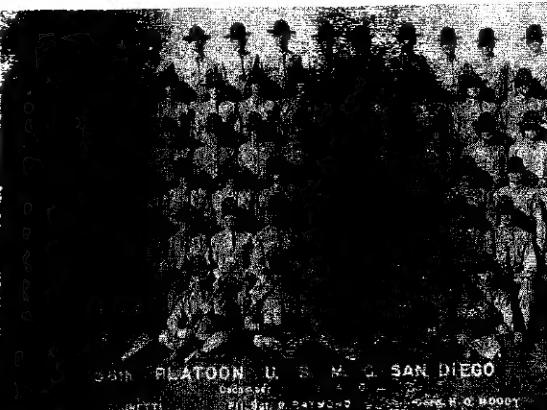
"Don't believe that water isn't hard," Black says now. "When I hit, it felt like concrete."

By the time he surfaced, his lungs were burning. He knew the Oklahoma would suck him under if he didn't get well clear of her, so he swam furiously for shore. Around him bullets stabbed the water, and flames spread. Later, Black realized the impact had torn his clothes off. In the following weeks, US ships began to muster a fleet. Like other Pearl survivors, Black was sought out by ships' commanders wanting to ask questions about being under fire.

He was assigned to the USS Portland and then to the USS Detroit before ending up on the USS Lexington, an aircraft carrier. On May 7, 1942, as the Lexington rejoined Task Force 17 in the Coral Sea, Japanese ships sailed to invade Australia. The Lexington and the Yorktown launched fighter planes that successfully destroyed nine Japanese aircraft.

But on the morning of May 8, a torpedo struck the Lexington's port side followed by three bomb hits from Japanese dive-bombers. At 1700 hours, Black's commander ordered all hands to abandon ship. That's when Black learned that slapping the water discouraged shark attacks. Nearby ships picked the crew from the water but not before several were lost to sharks.

As the Lexington blazed, an American destroyer closed in and fired two torpedoes into her hull.



301 PLATOON U. S. M. C. SAN DIEGO
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
JAMES R. BLACK, 6th from the right, second row from back

"They didn't give us any food because they didn't think we'd live long enough to eat it," Black says. Of the twelve men, four returned.

"They wanted to be darn sure the Japanese couldn't confiscate her," Black explains.

From the Lexington, he transferred to the USS Vincennes headed toward the Solomon Islands. Just three months after jumping from the Lexington, Black found himself in the water again. About 0200 on August 9, 1942, the commander of the Vincennes

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fired our big guns. And that's quite a job!" Then, Black
got leave to go home. While the Detroit was towed back to
Bremerton, Washington, Black took a bus from San Francisco to
his home in Clovis, New Mexico. He hadn't seen his parents for
four years.

Born one day after the 1918 Armistice of World War I in what
was still "the Wild West," Black carried a six-shooter before he
could read. To help pay his family drove cattle herds the full
length of New Mexico into Colorado. Until he was age five, Black
rode with the chuck wagon and gathered firewood at mealtime.

"Like all young men then, I had to grow up fast." After
graduating from high school, Black went to work for his
brother-in-law, Bates, for \$3 a day plus room and board
damning creeks and digging ponds. In late 1941, Black and Bates
were camping in Thermopolis, Wyoming. One morning after the first
snow, a rancher riding on horseback bringing mail.

He brought a dog. "Black explains.
He and Bates stopped and rode their horses to the rancher's
house and helped him get on his 1938 pick-up truck so he
could get there in time to catch the highway. There, Black and
Bates caught a bus to Cheyenne. At the recruiting office, Black
encountered four other men from a CCC camp, and they per-
suaded him to join the navy instead of the navy since the only
boat he'd ever been on was a pond.

But the mechanics got Black to a ship headed for Hawaii,
and it would be another year before he saw home again. When he
finally did visit Clovis in 1942, Black hadn't seen his dog, Old
Sport, for four years. Old Sport hadn't forgotten. Arriving
home in the middle of the night, Black got a royal welcome from
the Border collie.

"He jumped all over me and his barking woke the whole family up," Black remembers with a catch in his voice.

"Old Sport was probably the smartest dog in the whole country, the only dog I ever saw Black train." Feeling like the worst was
over, Black enjoyed the three months with his family unaware the
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ndon ship. The Japanese had successfully
with nearly sixty, eight and five-inch
other cruisers of the northern force.
Mercifully, the Japanese retired so sur-
vivors could escape by bullet, only sharks. For most of the
time, the Americans headed the blood-warm waters of Savo
Sound.

Black was aboard the USS Detroit, a light
cruiser that had joined the Aleutians in an offensive to pre-
vent the Japanese from crossing the Bering Strait and occu-
pying the island. The US forces prepared to land on Amchitka
Island and the Japanese shot off the Detroit's props
and rudder.

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worst was yet to come. Coming back, he was assigned to the
USS Chicago, a heavy cruiser sailing to the Coral Sea. On the

night of January 29, they
resisted firing at Japanese
Betty Bombers to avoid
giving their position away.
But about 2000 hours, two
Betts got too close to the
Chicago, and the Americans
fired on them. Crashing off
Chicago's port bow, they
illuminated the heavy
cruiser, and two torpedoes
hit her starboard side.

"We got the tar knocked
out of us," Black remem-
bers. "The Louisville took
us under tow to Espiritu
Island at about four knots."
By the next afternoon, it
seemed Chicago was out of
danger. Then seemingly
from nowhere, eleven
Betts roared into view

south of New Georgia. The lame Chicago was a sitting duck. "We
got hit amidships, and she listed," Black says, and when orders
came to abandon ship, he slid into the water and "swam like hell."

The survivors spent that night in the water dodging sharks
and bullets. People around him screamed, and Black recalls feeling the
sharks brush past him. Terrified and tired, Black could only pray as
he slapped the water around him and his wounded comrades. At
dawn, rescuers reached Black, but he was almost too weak from
exhaustion and dehydration to grab for the Jacob ladder.

"We looked like prunes," he reports, "after being in the water
so long, our skin just wrinkled up." On small Solomon Islands, the
Japanese established communications centers. Black's next assign-
ment, with eleven other men, was to land and tear one down.
They boarded a submarine that took them toward shore and used
a rubber raft to paddle to the island. "They didn't give us any food
because they didn't think we'd live long enough to eat it," Black
says. Of the twelve men, four returned.

Arriving on the island around midnight, they deflated the raft
and buried it. By night, they ran, and by day, they hid.
Nevertheless, the Japanese discovered them and gave chase. For
three days, they eluded the Japanese and finally found the communica-
tions center. Nearing total exhaustion, they blew it up.
Waiting for nightfall, they smuggled back to the raft and took
turns inflating it.

"We paddled and paddled, and the guys asked me how long
we'd paddled to get to the island. I kept reassuring them we were
almost there (to the rendezvous). Inside, I was praying, 'Lord, let
that sucker pop up,' and then there it was, right in front of us,"
Black relates.

Later, during the battle for New Britain, Black was hit in the
back by shrapnel, and his legs were paralyzed. "They loaded me
onto a whaleboat and rowed me out to a hospital ship. I was on
the second deck with about forty patients in bunk beds," Black
remembers. Like most everyone else, he was asleep at 0400 on
May 14 when the ship shuddered and people rolled out of bed.
Smoke and flames surged through the ship, and the second deck
began filling with water.

"I rolled onto the floor and wriggled over to the hatch," Black
remembers. "I used my arms to pull myself up the cables and got
topside. Sailors were putting rafts in the water, and they tossed me
overboard. Good thing I landed in the raft, I was dead from the
waist down," Black recalls.



Jimmy Daniel Black

LEADER

HMAS Centaur, clearly marked as a hospital ship, sunk in only three minutes with 268 people aboard. Black was the only patient who survived. He was flown to Pearl Harbor on a mail plane and hospitalized. Within five days, he could walk! The shrapnel had pinched the nerves in his spine, and doctors said when he heaved himself up the hatch on the Centaur, the effort must have dislodged the shrapnel. After recovering, Black went back to the Coral Sea and fought on New Britain...his last battle.

"We were trapped in our foxholes and couldn't talk or make any noise so we threaded a string through the dirt to connect us. Every so often, we'd tug on it and, the other men would tug back. That way, we could let each other know we were alive. There were just three of us left in our outfit. Every hour, I tugged on that string. Finally, I tugged, and no one tugged back. I was all alone," Black says. At nightfall, he crawled out of the foxhole and edged his way in what he hoped was the right direction. It was. Alone, he reported to duty, the sole survivor of his outfit.



Today, the former cowboy doesn't have his medals and citations. Like his many comrades, they lie at the bottom of the ocean.

50% BETTER